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FOR EUR/CARC AND INR; PLEASE PASS TO JAMES VAN DE VELDE
(NATIONAL COUNTERTERRORISM CENTER)

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/02/2017
TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [KISL](#) [AJ](#)
SUBJECT: "CREDIBLE VOICES" IN MUSLIM COMMUNITIES IN
AZERBAIJAN

REF: STATE 122288

Classified By: Ambassador Anne E. Derse for reasons 1.4 (b, c, d).

¶1. (C) Per reftel request, we propose the following three individuals as "credible voices" in Azerbaijan,s Muslim communities. We note that there is a very small number of candidates who meet the criteria due to several factors: (1) the GOAJ seeks to monopolize the playing field of credible Islamic voices; (2) the relatively low level of religiosity in Azerbaijan; (3) many individuals' "voices" are limited to their particular region of origin or the region from which they work. The Embassy has long-standing, positive relationships with the following three individuals.

¶2. (C) Dr. Altay Geyushev: Professor at Baku State University. Geyushev has an academic approach to Islam and does not appear to be a devout believer. He is respected among western and secular-leaning intellectuals in Azerbaijan. He has extensive personal connections with many clerics and believers in Azerbaijan. Pious believers are unlikely to look to Geyushev as a source of influence because his primary appeal is to other academics.

Background: Geyushev has a PhD in history and has been a professor for several years. He is probably in his late-40s. We do not know his confessional affiliation. He is an ethnic Azeri.

Geographic Area: Although based in Baku, Geyushev has the ability to reach national audiences through the media.

Forums for his influence: Print articles and speeches at local conferences or seminars.

Disagreements with U.S. Policy: No known disagreements and he does not advocate violence against the U.S.

Ideological position regarding jihad: He would likely argue that jihad is primarily or exclusively an internal, spiritual matter.

Derogatory information: No known information.

Current relationship with USG: Geyushev is a regular contact. He will spend the next 10 months as a Fulbright Scholar at Georgetown University, where he will be studying the development of Islam in Azerbaijan.

¶3. (C) Nariman Gasimoglu: Independent commentator on the role of Islam in Azerbaijan. The majority of his work is focused on showing how the Koran supports democracy, human rights, and religious tolerance. Gasimoglu is well-known for his translation of the Koran into Azerbaijani. Although

Gasimoglu is religiously observant, he has a primarily academic approach to Islam. His primary appeal likely is to other western-oriented academics. Although Gasimoglu has strong ties to the opposition Azadliq bloc and ran as an Azadliq candidate in the 2005 parliamentary election, he has withdrawn from political activity in the last two years.

Background: Educational background is unknown. He is probably in his late 40s. He is an ethnic Azeri.

Geographic Area: Although based in Baku, Gasimoglu could reach national audiences through the media.

Forums for influence: Print articles and lectures that cater to well-educated Muslims, who are more favorably inclined to the West. He probably has little to no influence outside of these circles.

Disagreements with U.S. Policy: Like many other opposition-leaning activists, Gasimoglu has been critical from time to time of U.S. democracy policy in Azerbaijan, arguing that the U.S. should pursue a more activist reform agenda. He does not advocate violence against the U.S.

Ideological position regarding jihad: He argues that jihad is exclusively an internal, spiritual matter.

Derogatory information: No known information.

Current Relationship with USG: Gasimoglu is a long-standing Embassy contact who regularly attends official events. He recently returned to Baku after spending several months studying in the DC area as a Fulbright scholar.

14. (S//NF) Ilgar Ibrahimoglu: Iranian-educated cleric.

Ibrahimoglu is a well-known cleric and opposition-leaning commentator. He was the imam at a historic mosque in Baku, but the authorities removed him in late 2003 due to his growing base of popular support. He was charged with participating in a violent opposition-organized demonstration against the results of the 2003 Presidential election. Ibrahimoglu continues to lead unofficial prayer groups in private homes. As a consequence of this episode, Ibrahimoglu is currently not allowed to travel outside of Azerbaijan. Ibrahimoglu's public comments focus on the need for enhanced human rights and religious freedom in Azerbaijan. He leads a local NGO, DEVAMM, that focuses on religious freedom and broader human rights concerns, and maintains good relationships with a range of civil society activists. Ibrahimoglu has been politically active in the past, campaigning actively in the 2005 parliamentary election on behalf of opposition candidate Rauf Arifoglu. He likely will play an active role on behalf of the opposition in the 2008 presidential campaign. Ibrahimoglu also has been a vocal critic of U.S. and western policies that he perceives to be un-Islamic, leading small political protests during the Prophet Mohamed cartoon controversy and during Israeli-Lebanese hostilities in the summer of 2006.

Background: Ibrahimoglu is a Shia, with some theological training in Iran. The authorities watch him closely because he has publicly criticized the GOAJ's human rights record and because of his links to Iran. He is probably in his late 30s or early 40s.

Geographic Area: Ibrahimoglu is based in Baku and reaches national audiences through DEVAMM activities and regular media appearances. He also has extensive international contacts through international human rights organizations.

Forums for his influence: In print media and lectures. Unlike Geyushov and Gasimoglu, Ibrahimoglu probably is more widely respected among devout believers because of his theological education and perceived "persecution" by the GOAJ. He is believed to exercise considerable influence among his network of underground followers, although recent reporting indicates that there may be a split in his

community.

Disagreements with U.S. Policy: Ibrahimoglu has a track record for publicly criticizing U.S. policy in Iraq and throughout the Muslim world. He argues that U.S. policy in Muslim countries is often counterproductive and favors corrupt, authoritarian regimes. He has led and participated in peaceful protests against Western and Israeli actions that are perceived to be un-Islamic, including a small march against the U.S. Embassy in July 2006. He has never publicly advocated violence against the U.S or other governments.

Ideological position regarding jihad: Unknown, although Ibrahimoglu has occasionally condemned al-Qaeda for its terrorist activities.

Derogatory information: A body of intelligence reporting suggests Ibrahimoglu's links to Iran. It is difficult to assess the precise nature of his past affiliation and whether such links continue.

Current Relationship with USG: Ibrahimoglu is a long-standing Embassy contact who also has long-standing relationships with Washington-based USG officials. He is an important source of information for our annual reports on Human Rights and International Religious Freedoms. He regularly attends official Embassy events. He has gone to the U.S. under the International Visitors' Program.

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